

The Ecuadorian Coup: Its Larger Meaning

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The abortive military-police coup in Ecuador, which took place on September 30, has raised numerous questions about the role of the US and its allies among the traditional oligarchy and the leftist social movements, Indian organizations and their political parties.

While President Correa and all governments in Latin America, and significant sectors of the Ecuadorian public described the violent actions as a coup, the principle organ of Wall Street – The Wall Street Journal – described it as a “police protest”. Spoke persons for Goldman Sachs and the Council of Foreign Relations referred to the police and military power grab against the democratically elected government as a self-induced “political crises” of the President. While the coup was underway the “Indian” movement CONAIE, launched a manifesto condemning the government, while the “Indian” party Pachakutik supported the ouster of the President and backed the police coup as a “just act of public servants”.

In summary, the imperial backers of the coup, sectors of the Ecuadorian elite and Indian movement downplayed the violent police uprising as a coup in order to justify their support for it as just another “legitimate economic protest”. In other words, the victim of the elite coup was converted into the repressor of the peoples’ will. The factual question of whether their was a coup or not, is central to deciding whether the government was justified in repressing the police uprising and whether in fact the democratic system was endangered.

The Facts about the Coup

The police did not simply “protest” against economic policies, they seized the National Assembly and attempted to occupy public buildings and media outlets. The air force – or at least those sectors collaborating with the police – seized the airport in Quito, concerted actions seizing and blocked strategic transport networks.. President Correa was assaulted and seized and kept hostage under police guard by scores of heavily armed police, who violently resisted the Special Forces who eventually freed the president resulting in scores of wounded and ten deaths. Clearly the leaders of the police uprising had more in mind that a simple “protest” over cancelled bonuses – they sought to overthrow the president and were willing to use their firepower to carry it off. The initial economic demands of public sector employees were used by the coup leaders as a springboard to oust the regime.

The fact that the coup failed is, in part, a result of the President’s vigorous and dramatic appeal to the people to take to the streets to defend democracy – an appeal, which resonated with thousands of supporters and denied the coup makers public support in the streets.

The facts on the ground all point to a violent attempt by the police and sectors of the military to seize power and depose the president – by any definition a coup. And so it was

immediately understood by all Latin American governments, from right to left, some of whom immediately closed their frontiers and threatened to break relations if the coup leaders succeeded. The only exception was Washington - whose first response was not to join in the condemnation but to wait and see what would be the outcome or as presidential spokesperson Philip Crowley announced "we are monitoring events", referring to the uprising as a "protest" challenging the government. When Washington realized that the coup was actively opposed by the Ecuadorian public, all the Latin American governments, the bulk of the armed forces and doomed to failure, Secretary of State Clinton called Correa to announce US "backing" for his government, referring to the coup as merely an "interruption of the democratic order".

In the run-up to the restoration of democracy, the trade unions were by and large passive observers, certainly no general strikes were discussed or even active mobilizations. The response of top military officials in the army were by and large opposed to the coup, except perhaps in the air force which seized the principle airport in Quito, before handing it over to anti-drug units of the police force. The anti narcotic police were in the forefront of the coup and not surprisingly were under intense US training and indoctrination for the past five years.

Explanation for the Varied Responses to the Coup

The responses to and interpretations of the coup varied according to different sets of objective interests and subjective perceptions. Latin American regimes unanimously rejected the coup fearing a coup multiplier effect in the region, in which other successful coups (after last year's in Honduras) would encourage the military and police to act in their countries. The memories of the recent past in which the military dismantled all representative institutions and jailed, tortured, killed and exiled political leaders was a key factor in shaping Latin America's resounding rejection. Secondly, the existing political order benefits the capitalist class, in almost all of Latin America and provides the bases for political stability and elite prosperity. No powerful mass movements threaten capitalist socio-economic hegemony, which might require the economic elite to back a coup.

Correa supporters were in the streets, though not in the numbers of his previous calls to action ousting ex-President Lucio Gutierrez, .They were mainly party loyalists. Others supported his "anti-imperialist" measures (expelling the US military base from Manta) or were defending democratic institutions even as they have become critical of his recent policies.

The US vacillation, shifting from an initial refusal to condemn to later denouncing the failed coup, was based on longstanding ties to the military but especially the police. Between 2006-2011 US military and police aid will have totaled \$94 million, of which \$89 million was channeled to the "war on drugs". From 2006-2008, Ecuadorian military and police trainees numbered 931, 526 of whom were incorporated in the "counter-drugs programs". It was precisely the anti-drug sector of the police which played a major role in seizing the airports in Quito during the abortive coup. The US certainly had plenty of motives for the coup. Correa came to power by ousting pro-US client Lucio Gutierrez and decimating the oligarchical parties who were responsible for dollarizing the economy and embracing Washington's free market doctrine. Correa called into question the foreign debt, declining to pay debts incurred under fraudulent circumstances. Most of all Correa was an ally of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, a member of ALBA and a strong opponent of Colombia, Washington's main ally in the region. Ecuador's policy weakened Washington's strategy of

“encircling Venezuela” with hostile regimes. Having already backed the successful coup against Honduras President Zelaya, an ally of Chavez, Washington had everything to gain from a military coup which ousted another member of ALBA. Washington is pursuing a “triple strategy” of 1/diplomacy, offering to improve relations,2/ subversion by building subversive capacity by financing the police and military and3/ financing via AID, NED, World Bank and NGO’s sectors of the Indian movement especially Pachacutik and dissident groups linked Lucio Gutierrez.

The leadership of the Indian movement varied in its response to the coup. The most extreme position adopted by the near moribund electoral party Pachacutik (US aid recipient) actually endorsed the police coup and call on the masses to form a “united front”, a call which fell on deaf ears. The bulk of the Indian movement (CONAIE) adopted a complex position of denying that a coup was taking place, yet rejecting the police violence and setting forth a series of demands and criticisms of Correa’s policies and methods of governance. No effort was made to either oppose the coup or to support it. In other words, in contrast to its militant anti dictatorial past, CONAIE was virtually a marginal actor.

The passivity of CONAIE and most of the trade unions has its roots in profound policy disagreements with the Correa regime.

Correa’s Self-Induced Vulnerability: His Right Turn

During the emerging citizens-movement five years ago, Rafael Correa played an important role in deposing the authoritarian, corrupt and pro-imperialist regime of Lucio Gutierrez. Once elected President, he put in practice some of his major electoral promises: evicting the US from its military base in Manta; rejecting foreign debt payments based on illicit accounts; raising salaries, the minimum wage, providing low interest loans and credit to small business. He also promised to consult with and take account of the urban social and Indian movements, in the lead up to the election of a constitutional assembly to write up a new constitution. In 2007 Correa’s list running with his new party Alianza Pais (the country alliance) won a two thirds majority in the legislature. However facing declining revenues due to the world recession, Correa made a sharp turn to right. He signed lucrative contracts with multi-national mining companies granting them exploitation rights on lands claimed by indigenous communities without consulting the latter, despite a past history of catastrophic contamination of Indian lands, water and habitat. When local communities acted to block the agreements, Correa sent in the army and harshly repressed the protestors. In subsequent efforts to negotiate, Correa only heard his own voice and dismissed the Indian leaders as a “bunch of bandits”, and “backward elements” who were blocking the “modernization of the country”.

Subsequently, Correa went on the offensive against the public employees, pushing legislation reducing salaries, bonuses and promotions, repudiating settlements based on agreements between unions and legislators. In the same way Correa imposed new laws on university governance, which alienated the professoriate, administration and students. Equally damaging to Correa’s popularity among the organized sectors of the wage and middle classes, was his authoritarian style in pushing his agenda, the pejorative language he used to label his interlocutors and his insistence that negotiations were only a means to discredit his counterparts.

Contrary to Correa’s claim to be a pathfinder for “21st century socialism”, he was, instead,

the organizer of a highly personal strategy for 21st century capitalism, one based on a dollarized economy, large scale foreign investments in mining, petroleum and financial services and social austerity.

Correa's 'right turn', however; also depended on political and financial support from Venezuela and its Cuban and Bolivian allies. As a result Correa fell between two chairs: he lost support from the social left because of "pro-extractive" foreign economic policies and austere domestic programs and did not secure support from the US, because of his ties to Chavez and Cuba.

As a result, Correa so alienated the unions and the Indian and social movements that he was only able to secure very limited amount of "street power" in closing down the economy to thwart the coup. Equally important, the US and its collaborators saw in his declining organized support and the growth of social protest, an opportunity to test the waters for a possible coup, via their most dependable collaborators in the police and to a lesser degree in the air force. The police uprising was a test run, encouraged to proceed, without any overt, commitment, pending its success or failure. If the police coup secured sufficient military support, Washington and its civilian political oligarchs could intervene, call for a "negotiated outcome" which would either oust Correa or "turn him" into a "pragmatic" client. In other words, a "successful" coup would eliminate another Chavez ally, but even a failed coup would put Correa on notice for the future.

Final Reflections in the Way of a Conclusion

The unfolding of the police coup turned into a farce: the coup makers miscalculated their support within the military as well as among the protesting Indians and unions. They stood alone without glory or success. Lacking national leaders, or even a coherent strategy, they were put down in a matter of hours. They misjudged the willingness of the US to commit, once it became clear that the coup makers lacked any resonance among the military elite and were totally inept. What may have started as a coup ended as a comic opera with a brief shoot-out with the military at a police hospital.

On the other side, the fact that Correa, in the end could only rely on his elite special forces, to free him from police hostage, reveals the tragedy of a popular leader. One who started with immense popular backing, promising to finally fulfill the demand of the campesinos for land reform, the Indians demand for sovereignty to negotiate over mineral riches and urban labors' demands for just remuneration, and ended returning to the Presidential Palace protected by military armored carriers.

The failed coup in Ecuador raises a larger political question: Does the near demise of Correa spell the end of the experiment of the 'new center-left regimes' which attempt to "balance" vigorous export-based growth with moderate social payoffs? The entire success of the center-left regimes has been based on their ability to subsidize and promote agro-mineral foreign and domestic capital while increasing employment, wages and subsistence payments (anti-poverty programs). This 'political formula' has been underwritten by the boom in demand from Asia and other world markets and by historically high commodity prices. When the crises of 2008 broke, Ecuador was the weakest link in Latin America, as it was tied to the dollar and was unable to 'stimulate' growth or cushion the economy. Under conditions of crises, Correa resorted to repression of the social movements and trade unions and greater efforts to secure support from petro-mining multi-nationals. Moreover, Ecuador's police and military was much more vulnerable to infiltration by US agencies

because of large scale funding and training programs unlike Bolivia and Venezuela which had expelled these agencies of subversion. Unlike Argentina and Brazil, Correa lacked a capacity to “conciliate” diverse sectors of social movements through negotiations and concessions. Of course, the penetration of the Indian communities by imperial funded NGO’s promoting “separatism” and identity’ politics did not make conciliation easy.

Nevertheless, despite the particularities of Ecuador, the failed coup underlines the relative importance of resolving basic socio-economic grievances, if the center-left macro-economic projects are to succeed. Apart from Venezuela, none of the center-left regimes are carrying out structural reforms (land reform) nationalizations of strategic sectors, income redistribution .Even the Chavez regime in Venezuela has lost a great deal of popular support because of neglect of essential services (public safety, garbage collection, delivery of water, electrical power and food delivery) because of corruption and incompetence. Over time, the center-left can no longer depend on “charismatic” leaders to compensate for the lack of structural changes. The regimes must sustain the improvement of wages and salaries and delivery of basic services in an ambience of ‘social dialogue’. The absence of continuous social reforms, while agro-mining elites prosper, opens the door for the return of the right and provokes divisions in the social coalitions supporting the center-left regimes. Most important the implosion of the center-left provides an opportunity for Washington to subvert and overthrow the regimes, reverse their relatively independent foreign policy and reassert its hegemony.

The institutional foundations of the center-left are fragile everywhere, especially the police and army, because officialdom is still engaged in government programs with US military, narco-police and intelligence agencies. The center-left regimes - except Venezuela - have continued to participate in all joint military programs. The center-left has not transformed the state. Equally important it has promoted the economic bases of the pro-US Right via its agro-mineral export strategy. It has ignored the fact that political stability is temporary and based on a balance of social power resulting from the popular rebellions of the 2000-2005 period .The center-left ignores the reality that as the capitalist class prospers, as a result of center-left agro-mineral export strategies, so does the political right. And as the wealth and political power of the export elites increase and as the center-left turns to the Right, as has been the case with Correa, there will be greater social conflict and a new cycle of political upheavals, if not by the ballot box then via the bullet - via coups or via popular uprisings.

The successful coup in Honduras (2009) and the recent failed coup in Ecuador are symptomatic of the deepening crises of “post-neo-liberal” politics. The absence of a socialist alternative, the fragmentation of the social movements, the embrace of “identity politics”, have severely weakened an effective organized alternative when and if the center-left regimes go into crises. For the moment most “critical intellectuals” cling to the center-left in hopes of a “left turn”, of a political rectification, rather than taking the difficult but necessary road of rebuilding an independent class based socialist movement.

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